

## *The root of city's tree replacement problem*

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### **Body**

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Toronto wants to drench itself in trees and it wants to do it fast. According to the city's TransformTO Net Zero Strategy, a climate action plan, the city is aiming to meet a target of 40 per cent tree canopy cover by the year 2050.

Meanwhile, a Torontonians named Chris Tindal is aiming to meet a more modest target. He wants to plant a single tree in his own front yard. In fact, he's wanted to do this for nearly a year, but this being Toronto (a city not known for its great sense of urgency) Tindal is still waiting to break ground out front.

Tindal's tree saga began last October, when the Leslieville resident submitted a service request through 311 for the city to plant a tree in his front yard. He hoped a new front yard tree would serve as a replacement for the sickly Manitoba maple tree that was removed from his backyard earlier in the year.

"An arborist described it as being like a weed," Tindal told me about the late tree. "A weak soft wood tree growing sideways, hanging over other yards, intermingled with utility cables. It was unambiguous it had to come down."

When it did come down, Tindal was told he'd have to replace the backyard tree or pay a fee of several hundred dollars. He was happy to replace the tree; the only problem was that there was no room for a new tree in his backyard.

As a result he asked if he could plant one in his front yard instead. The answer was no, because it turned out that while his backyard was his own private property, his front yard was technically the city's property. In other words, if he wanted a new tree on his front yard he wasn't allowed to plant it himself, the city would have to plant it.

And in order for the city to plant it, Tindal would have to make a new request to the city. (He would also have to pay the fee for failing to replace the tree on his private property.) He went ahead and made the request for the new front yard tree. He was told he'd hear back in roughly eight weeks.

It's been almost a year.

Tindal summed up his frustration with the city on Twitter like this: "So in summary the city fined me for not planting a tree that they said only they could plant, while showing no signs that they have any interest or ability to plant a tree. I'd plant the tree at my own expense but I'm not allowed."

This story is so classically Toronto it should be adapted for the screen as a Heritage Minute.

## The root of city's tree replacement problem

In all seriousness though, what exactly is going on here? Why is a city with lofty environmental goals few think it will realistically achieve making it difficult for a resident to plant a tree in his own yard?

The answer, if you ask the city, is extremely practical. Though he couldn't speak to Tindal's case specifically, Daniel Boven, a tree protection manager with the city's parks, forestry and recreation department, told me there are a number of reasons why Torontonians can't just go around planting trees on city property willy nilly.

"Planting a tree is a positive," he said, "But planting a tree where there could be conflicts creates an issue." These conflicts might include - but aren't limited to - underground utilities, liability should the homeowner hurt himself in the planting process, obstructed sight lines between signals and stop signs, and the list goes on.

"There's a process that city staff go through when they get a request to plant on city land. There has to be a review of the location to make sure it's suitable."

As for the fee Tindal coughed up, it turns out he could have put that money to an actual tree - just not on his property. According to Boven, if a homeowner doesn't have enough space to replace a downed tree on private property, they can pay the city to plant a tree elsewhere. "It goes into a tree canopy reserve so it's planted throughout these different programs including the residential tree planting program, the backyard tree planting program, or through various ravine stewardship activities throughout the city," he said.

Tindal, however, didn't know this option existed, nor I'm guessing do many Torontonians reading this, which is a problem all on its own. If the city wants to reach its tree planting goals, it ought to do a better job informing people that these options exist before they turn to an already-burdened 311 program.

But beyond this, Toronto has to put its money where its mouth is. The city has massive ambitions - to cover the city in trees, new affordable housing, and we hope, consistently running public bathrooms and water fountains. Yet Toronto's property taxes remain uniquely low. They needn't remain so and they simply can't remain so if the city wants to make good on its climate ambitions.

As the climate crisis intensifies and background environmental projects like planting trees move into the foreground, here's hoping money and staff move with them. And that if he so chooses, a guy can plant a new tree in his yard, no matter who owns it.

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